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Title: Biopics of Austen, Woolf, Plath and Murdoch: A Study

Registration No. VB-1732 of 2014-15

Date of Registration: 08.09.2014

Synopsis

Adaptation studies have focused at length on the process of transference from text to film. The research aims to stretch the analysis of adaptation to the process of adapting the author from 'real' to 'reel'. Film biopic and adaptations share a common set of relations--- both distil and dramatise their sources—a life and a source text respectively. But unlike adaptations, the biopic was neglected for a long time though, as a genre, it maintains dense intertextual and interdisciplinary resonances. Its hybridized character allows interesting problematisations arising from the multiplicity of sources, the convergence of different media and the collision of the 'real' and the 'reel'. The first major research on the genre was Geogre Custen's *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History.* This was followed by Dennis Bingham's recent book *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*which talks about the role played by gender in the biopic. In the real world, unlike men, women are seldom encouraged to be heroes and the cultural mirror offered by the biopic reveals the same. While we have many Great Men biopics, female biopics are few and they usually depict women in their creative roles. Bingham argues that the female biopic is different from the male biopic in that it presents its protagonist on a downward trajectory and typically finds conflict and tragedy in women's success. However, due to the impact of women's empowerment, the codes of the classic biopic are under intense revision. In fact the evolution of the biopic itself can indicate important socio-cultural changes.

The research will focus particularly on recent female author biopics and put to test how far the life stories put forward by mainstream cinema are generated by systems that reinforce sexual stereotyping and to what extent have they succeeded in freeing the biographical portraits from the same. In the case of this particular study, new perspectives could also emerge regarding the position of women authors in the literary canon. The commercial aspects of cinema resulting in the commodification of the author will also be included within the scope of the research. Finally it will touch upon the problem of reception arising out of the collision of the real and the reel.

Beginning with a brief study of the biopic genre and its evolution, the theory of adaptation and documentaries in the introductory chapter, the research will proceed to take up the following biopics for case study: Iris Murdoch in *Iris,*(2001), direction & screenplay Richard Eyre, based on Bayley's memoir *Elegy for Iris,* Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*,(2002), dir. Stephen Daldry, screenplay David Hare ; Sylvia Plath in *Sylvia,*(2003), dir. Christine Jeffs, screenplay John Brownlow, Jane Austen in *Becoming Jane,* (2007), dir. Julian Jarrold, screenplay Kevin Hood & Sarah Williams and *Miss Austen Regrets* (2007) dir. Jeremy Lovering, screenplay Gwyneth Hughes. The thesis will comprise six chapters after including the

introduction and conclusion. The chronology of the making of the films will be observed in the organisation of the chapters.

In her essay, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) Woolf draws our attention time and again to the absence of women as authors. Women are mostly represented by men in their works. In cinema too, scholars have observed, women's lives which would obviously include the lives of women authors, have primarily been represented by men. How far does the adaptor's gender and socio-cultural background condition the depiction of the author's live and philosophy? To what extent do the biographical subjects portrayed in these films match with our perception of the real people and creative artists as revealed from our reading of their works, journals, diaries, letters and biographies? Is the original expression of the artist clouded in the attempt to entertain the viewers? How is the male author constituted versus the woman author in biopics? These are questions that the research will probe into.

The hypothesis is that the reel version of authors, especially female authors, tend to mythicise the philosophy and personality of the author, in order to adapt the same into the popular mass medium of the film. The filters of the adaptors inevitably alter the way one perceives the author so that it becomes important to consider the gender and socio cultural background of the adaptor. Again, such a process of adaptation disrupts the sequence of reception wherein one might see a film before reading the book. This disruption creates a 'celluloid' version of the author in the mind of the reader, which is frequently a complete reversal/re-orientation of the person and philosophy of the original author.

When we think of the commodification of the woman author, the name that immediately comes to mind is that of Sylvia Plath's. Her life and death were both controversial. Her tragic marriage with Ted Hughes is the theme of the film *Sylvia.* The film places the entire burden of responsibility for Plath's death on Ted Hughes. Sylvia Plath is portrayed entirely as a victim instead of a poet. Very little attention is given to Plath as a writer of confessional poetry who engaged continuously in self contemplation, was obsessed with publication, wore many masks, experienced instability of identity, had problematic childhood relations with her parents and suffered from bipolar disorder.

The characterisation of Woolf in *The Hours*, in both its text and film versions, is a construct of three men who desire to define Woolf: Michael Cunningham, Stephen Daldry and David Hare. In the process they limit her identity and exclude the complexity that is essential to her life and writing. Both the text and the film show Woolf as constantly tortured by mental illness and constantlyas a victim and a lesbian. In fact the three men use Woolf in a way that Woolf herself feared male writers would use women. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf states that if women had no existence except in fiction written by men, one would imagine her as a person of great importance as some of the most profound thoughts fall from her lips whereas in real life she could hardly read and was the property of her husband.

Coming to the most widely adapted author, Jane Austen, we can trace a certain trend in the recent Austen biopics—they present the novels as the author's lived experiences. *Becoming Jane* is no exception—it is simply a re-writing of *Pride and Prejudice* which suggests that Austen's understanding of human nature and romance spring from her personal experience and

love affair with Tom Lefroy. An adaptation such as this one reminds us of *Shakespeare in Love* which also reduced Shakespeare's work to biography. But there is a difference. *Shakespeare in Love* has not become the model for understanding *Romeo and Juliet*. In contrast, the growing number of Austen biopics reinforce the same premise that her fiction is no more than a translation of her life. Such approaches overlook Austen's career as a writer engaged with issues like gender, class, education, human nature, love, marriage and families. They also fail to acknowledge her wit and deep emotional intelligence. These biopics therefore compel us to re evaluate the problem of the woman writer's place in the literary canon. Miss Austen Regrets (based on her letters) is however a more convincing depiction of the life of Austen.

Having stated that no biopic is a documentary or history, it would not be inappropriate to suggest that the test of a good author biopic (irrespective of the gender of the author) depends on how sincerely and genuinely the essence of the writer's life and career is artistically presented. Approaching the cinematic texts under analysis from this premise, the research will attempt to deconstruct the filmic avatars of Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Iris Murdoch using feminist film studies and trace their character graphs across mediums.

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